



Aging Well in America
Healthy Long Term Living through Avoidance of Risk
for Chronic Conditions
Eduardo J. Sanchez, M.D., M.P.H., Commissioner

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Eduardo J. Sanchez, Commissioner
Texas Department of State Health Services

I've heard it said that there are 3 stages of life: youth, middle age, and "you're looking wonderful."

What I'd like to do this morning is suggest 3 guidelines for looking and feeling wonderful for America's seniors.

More than 50% of Americans over age 65 have at least two chronic conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.¹ However, the frequency and trajectory of these chronic diseases are heavily influenced by lifestyle choices. The three leading causes of death in this country are heart disease, cancer and stroke.² The top three actual causes of death are tobacco use, poor diet/lack of exercise, and alcohol abuse.³

I'm not going to discuss the importance of avoiding tobacco and misuse of alcohol. We all understand those issues.

Instead, I want to talk about what I consider to be the three cornerstones of health for seniors: healthy eating, physical activity, and connectedness.

Eating habits early in life influences many chronic diseases that develop later in life, such as osteoporosis. Children and young adults can reduce their risk of this disease through physical activity and adequate calcium intake. Continuing to eat healthy as one ages further reduces the risk of developing chronic disease and also helps control existing chronic diseases and increase quality of life.

The foundation of healthy eating includes consuming several servings of fruit and vegetables daily, and staying within recommended guidelines for daily consumption of sodium, fat and protein. Yet only a third of older adults meet those guidelines.⁴

The 2nd cornerstone of healthy living is safe physical activity, which reduces the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and certain cancers. Physical activity helps control weight and chronic diseases such as diabetes and arthritis. Moderate exercise such as walking or gardening that places weight on bones can help ensure bone health, helps relieve the pain of arthritis, and reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Unfortunately, 40% of older Texans reported that they participated in no physical activity in the past six months.⁵ This is of concern, because regular physical activity, coupled with good nutrition, decreases the need for medications, doctors, visits and hospitalization.

An individual's aerobic capacity declines by 3-6% in one's 20's and 30's. Those in their 70's and beyond face a decline of more than 20% per decade.⁶ That's why it's so important to ensure one is making an effort to achieve and maintain as high a level as possible to ensure independent living as long as possible.

Realistically, seniors may face serious challenges to healthy eating and physical activity. Difficulties chewing, gastrointestinal problems, the effect of certain medications on taste or appetite, arthritis pain that makes cooking difficult, financial restrictions that make healthy eating more challenging – these issues must be addressed.

Ideally, family members and friends can help seniors meet these challenges. Home-delivered meals or group meal programs can help as well. While congregate eating

programs are available to all seniors regardless of income, ensuring that barriers such as transportation do not limit access to these programs may be a cost effective approach to decreasing the incidence of chronic disease and the attendant cost of treatment.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the importance of coupling physical activity and healthy eating with appropriate prevention and screening measures. The CDC recommends annual flu vaccinations for people over 65, yet more than 30% of older Texans haven't had a flu shot in the last two years. And 17% of those over age 65 haven't even had a routine checkup in the last two years.⁷

Our Primary care providers can help seniors maintain their health. But it is really up to each of us to engage in healthy behaviors, and to help and support our senior family members to sustain these behaviors.

Healthy eating and regular physical activity are the cornerstones of health, regardless of age. More and more research shows what is good for the body is good for the mind. And vice versa. Engaging in enjoyable physical activity benefits mental functions and research suggests it may slow the development of Alzheimer's-like changes in the brain.

Likewise, engaging in meaningful, enjoyable activities and relationships provides benefits to the body as well as the soul.

Everything we can do to encourage and support our seniors' efforts to stay connected with others, be physically active, and eat healthy foods will pay great dividends in terms of reducing the risk of chronic diseases and enhancing quality of life.

Poor health is not the inevitable consequence of aging. Every senior American who is disconnected to others, physically inactive, and eating an unhealthy diet is

probably already suffering from at least one chronic disease and on a trajectory of rapidly declining health. And every senior American who is connected, physically active and eating a healthy diet is probably looking and feeling marvelous.

This, quite simply, is the way to health.

¹ Center on an Aging Society (2003) Data Profile: Multiple Chronic Conditions: A Challenge for the 21st Century. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University)

² U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention

³ U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention

⁴ U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Physical Activity and Good Nutrition: Essential Elements to Prevent Chronic Diseases and Obesity. 2002.

⁵ Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services, Benchmark Survey of Older Texans, Unreleased data (2004)

⁶ Jerome L. Fleg, Christopher H. Morrell, Angelo G. Bos, Larry J. Brant, Laura A. Talbot, Jeanette G. Wright, and Edward G. Lakatta. Accelerated Longitudinal Decline of Aerobic Capacity in Healthy Older Adults *Circulation*, Jul 2005; 10.1161/CIRCULATION.AHA.105.545459.

⁷ Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services, Benchmark Survey of Older Texans, Unreleased data (2004)

See Also:

“Growing Older, Eating Better” by Paula Kurtzwell, Federal Citizen Information Center (FCIC)

“Exercise Slows Development of Alzheimer’s-Like Brain Changes in Mice, New Study Finds” National Institute on Aging, from *The Journal of Neuroscience*, April 27, 2005

U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Healthy Aging/Health Information for Older Adults